

Cooperative Learning in the Classroom

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From the beginning of time teachers of the world have been trying to figure out the best way to teach their pupils. Different practices have been tried, many have failed and others have succeeded. One teaching strategy that continued to be questioned by teachers is that of cooperative learning. When group work is announced in a class room many teachers might hear sighs, complaints, or possibly, rejoicing. Cooperative learning is a teaching practice that breaks students into groups of 3-4 with each student having a particular role within the group (Johnson-Johnson, 1999). There are many advantages to cooperative learning over individual learning based on the different dynamics that a cooperative learning group can offer. To use this strategy correctly certain structure is needed which will be discussed. Cooperative learning has advantages over individual work, including: social interaction, transfer of ideas, and group leadership skills. Using cooperative learning is more advantageous than individual learning, if used correctly (Davis, 1999, Giraud, 1997, Johnson-Johnson, 1999, 2009).

First, what exactly is cooperative learning? Cooperative learning is not just group work; but a very dynamic teaching strategy that is not as simple as it may seem. There are a few main types of cooperative learning. These types are formal, informal, and cooperative learning base groups. Formal cooperative learning is a type of group work structured in assigned groups of 3-4 students in which the teacher has already analyzed and assessed individuals to create the most effective group based on social dynamics within the group (Johnson-Johnson, 1999). Ideally formal learning groups should be made based on a mixture of intellectual ability, academic interest, and style (Davis, 1999). Informal cooperative learning is as it sounds, informal. Informal groups are made in class and can last from a few minutes to one class period. Base groups are created early on in a group of students to help foster relationships over time and can last for years (Johnson-Johnson, 2009).

Based on research the best cooperative learning groups are groups with 3-4 members (Johnson-Johnson, 1999). Each of these members has a specific role within the group, and each are held accountable by the others. Assigned roles are researcher, summarizer, collector, and technical advisor (Johnson-Johnson, 1999). This distinction of roles is what makes the difference between “group work” and actual cooperative learning.

To conduct cooperative learning, there is a specific structure that must be followed that is much more involved than regular group work. Each type of cooperative learning can be used effectively, but success is highly dependent on the type of lesson that is being discussed between the members of the group. Formal cooperative learning is most effective in longer types of projects (Johnson-Johnson, 1999). Projects such as presentations or even writing a paper over a week of lectures are best associated with formal cooperative learning. Informal cooperative learning can be used effectively in small amounts of time. If the material is short or can be summed up in one class period, informal cooperative learning can be beneficial to both teacher and students. Using informal cooperative learning can help to transfer ideas between individuals much quicker, which in turn helps students develop a better understanding of the assigned material in a small amount of time such as one class period (Johnson-Johnson 1999). Base groups are very complicated to create. Base groups are created to establish long term relationships between group members that help each other with class material, group work in class, and help outside of class. These groups are best established early (e.g. elementary school), so that in the future the students within will continue to help each other for years to come, building a long term relationship that will last through the end of their primary and secondary school careers (Johnson-Johnson, 1999). Base groups can be used to effectively track the development of students throughout the year on

subjects such as math and reading. Teachers should use the different types of cooperative learning depending on the material being assigned. Effective use of cooperative learning can assist both teacher and student in the learning process.

Cooperative learning has advantages associated with it that individual learning cannot match. The first of these advantages is social interaction. Individual work has its useful applications, but it cannot match the advantages of group work especially when it comes to social interaction. Social interaction between members of a given group helps dissolve nervousness and insecurity. As one professor's students stated, "It's easier to ask a question when it's not in front of the whole class" (Giraud, 1997). Another advantage of cooperative learning is idea transfer. When in a group, the interactions between members allow for an exchange of ideas much quicker and effectively. Group interaction allows for the more knowledgeable students in the group to help those less understanding of the material. The last advantage of cooperative learning is leadership skills. To manage many different tasks at once, and keep everyone on track, takes strong leadership skills. Cooperative learning helps to develop these skills because each person is held accountable by the other. David Johnson and Roger Johnson state that "To ensure that each member is strengthened, students are held individually accountable to do their share of the work" (Johnson-Johnson, 1999). Leadership is needed to manage each individual and because each member is held accountable and leadership is not only held by one person. The advantages of cooperative learning over individual

work would then include, helping develop social skills, facilitating exchange of ideas, and the improvement of leadership skills.

Overall, cooperative learning is not just group work, but a complex teaching practice. While cooperative learning has advantages it also has disadvantages. If the wrong type of dynamics in cooperative groups are used or, these groups applied to the wrong type of lesson, the outcome could be disastrous. Managing groups also has its different challenges because of different dynamics. Cooperative learning is an effective practice that should be adopted more often for use in instruction. Because of the different advantages cooperative learning is an effective teaching practice that can be applied to many different situations, materials, and projects. Cooperative learning teaches social skills, idea exchange, and leadership skills all of which are lifelong teachings.

References

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